

The Countess Castiglione

Virginia Elisabetta Luisa Carlotta Antonietta Teresa Maria Oldoini Rapallini (French: *Virginie Élisabeth Louise Charlotte Antoinette Thérèse Marie Oldoini*) was born on 22 March 1837 in Florence, Tuscany to Marquis Filippo Oldoini Rapallini and Isabella Lamporecchi, members of the minor Tuscan nobility; she was often known by her nickname of "Nicchia". Ignored by her father, she was educated by her grandfather Ranieri Lamporecchi.^[2] She married Francesco Verasis, Count of Castiglione, at the age of 17. He was twelve years her senior. They had a son, Giorgio.

Her cousin, Camillo, Count of Cavour, was the prime minister of Victor Emmanuel II, King of Sardinia (that included also Piedmont, Val d'Aosta, Liguria and Savoy), and later of reunited Italy. When the Count and Countess traveled to Paris in 1855, the Countess was under her cousin's instructions to plead the cause of Italian unity with Napoleon III of France. She achieved notoriety by becoming Napoleon III's mistress, a scandal that led her husband to demand marital separation. In 1855, she had a brief affair with King Victor Emmanuel II of Italy, who nicknamed her "Nini".^[2]

In 1856–1857, she entered the social circle of European royalty. During her relationship with the French emperor, she met Augusta of Saxe-Weimar, Otto von Bismarck and Adolphe Thiers. She had many lovers, including a banker of the Rothschild family and the then director of the Louvre Museum.^[2]

The Countess was known for her beauty and her flamboyant entrances in elaborate dress at the imperial court. One of her most infamous outfits was a "Queen of Hearts" costume.^[3] George Frederic Watts painted her portrait in 1857.^[4] She was described as having long, wavy blonde hair, a fair complexion, a delicate oval face, and eyes that constantly changed colour from green to an extraordinary blue-violet.

Italian unification

The Countess returned to Italy in 1857 when her affair with Napoleon III was over. Four years later, the Kingdom of Italy was proclaimed, conceivably in part due to the influence that the Countess had exerted on Napoleon III. That same year, she returned to France and settled in Passy.

In 1871, just after the defeat of France in the Franco-Prussian War, she was called to a secret meeting with Otto von Bismarck to explain to him how the German occupation of Paris could be fatal to his interests. She may have been persuasive because Paris was spared Prussian occupation.^[5]

Photographic artist

In 1856 she began sitting for Mayer and Pierson, photographers favored by the imperial court. Over the next four decades she directed Pierre-Louis Pierson to help her create 700 different photographs in which she re-created the signature moments of her life for the camera. She spent a large part of her personal fortune and even went into debt to

execute this project. Most of the photographs depict the Countess in theatrical outfits, such as the Queen of Hearts dress. A number of photographs depict her in poses that were risqué for the era – notably, images that expose her bare legs and feet. In these photos, her head is cropped out.

Robert de Montesquiou, a Symbolist poet, dandy, and avid art collector, was fascinated by the Countess di Castiglione. He spent thirteen years writing a biography, *La Divine Comtesse*, which appeared in 1913. After her death, he collected 433 of her photographs, all of which entered the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.^[6]

Later years

Virginia spent her declining years in an apartment in the Place Vendôme, where she had the rooms decorated in funeral black, the blinds kept drawn, and mirrors banished—apparently so she would not have to confront her advancing age and loss of beauty. She would leave the apartment only at night. In the 1890s she began a brief collaboration with Pierson again, though her later photographs clearly show her loss of any critical judgement, possibly due to her growing mental instability. She wished to set up an exhibit of her photographs at the Exposition Universelle (1900), though this did not happen. She died on 28 November 1899, at the age of sixty-two, and was buried at the Père Lachaise Cemetery in Paris.